The Archives of South Carolina[1]

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Historical Commission of South Carolina

THE text for some of my remarks is the following passage from Robert H. Woody's report on the public records of South Carolina, which was published in *The American Archivist* for October, 1939:

> . . . anyone who examines the South Carolina archives must be impressed by the vast amount of records which have been preserved in spite of wars, invasions, fires, and earthquakes. Equally impressive until recent years was the unfortunate state of preservation and the lack of any systematic organization of these records. One marvels that South Carolinians, notably loyal to their state and proud of her history — even to the extent of being called provincials and ancestor-worshippers — should have permitted their ancient records to moulder in basements and be scattered in various depositories. But they did. Under the circumstances it is not remarkable that South Carolinians should feel that much of their history has been misinterpreted by ignorant critics. Yet this is not altogether the fault of the critics.

I say that I want this passage to serve as the text only for some of my remarks, for I understand that I am expected to discuss recent records as well as the "ancient" ones on which Mr. Woody reported some 12 years ago.

Being one of those who are "notably loyal to their state," I could hardly be asked to endorse the suggestion that South Carolinians are "provincials and ancestor-worshippers." Even a loyal South Carolinian will have to admit, however, that in the other parts of Mr. Woody's statement there are large elements of truth. Moreover, though it is charitably intimated in his report that something was being done in 1939 to improve the condition of the South Carolina archives, it must be confessed that far less has been accomplished than is urgently needed and that, however much we would like to believe otherwise, there is still no positive assurance that these needs will be satisfactorily met at any time in the immediate future.

Having traced the history of the South Carolina public records as thoroughly as his time permitted, Mr. Woody ventured to say, "There is every indication that prior to 1865 the records were

[1] Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Annapolis, Maryland, October 16, 1951.

reasonably well kept, or at least there is plenty of evidence that they were not forgotten." Every new piece of information that comes to light tends to confirm his conclusion. The measures that were adopted in those early years for the protection of the archives were timely; they were usually wise; and those that were applied in times of crisis may even be described as heroic. Much copying and indexing was done; and, by means of subsidies granted to individual historians and the South Carolina Historical Society, something was accomplished toward procuring transcripts of records in England and toward publishing the more significant documents. It is largely because of these wise measures that the State has today the "vast amount of records" to which Mr. Woody referred.

Little care was taken of the records during the generation following the War Between the States. Some of the old records unquestionably were lost, and current records were less systematically kept; but the great number of both still extant is convincing proof that there was neither wholesale nor wanton destruction, as some have been tempted at times to believe.

The first clear indication of a reviving sense of responsibility on the part of the State for something more than the routine care of its archives was the creation in 1891 of the Public Record Commission. The only duty assigned to this body was that of completing the work, begun some forty years before, of procuring copies of documents relating to South Carolina in the British Public Record Office; but, as this task was being brought to a successful conclusion, the commission called attention to the "scattered" condition of the records in the various State offices and recommended the establishment of a permanent archives agency. The result was the passage of an act in 1894 providing for the Historical Commission of South Carolina. The commission was given authority "to procure such documents . . . as they deem necessary," to deposit them, along with the English transcripts, in the office of the Secretary of State, and to arrange them and make them accessible. This was an important step forward, the first of its kind that I have been able to discover in any southern State; but the experiences of the next ten years showed that serious mistakes had been made in linking the commission with another State agency and in failing to make regular provision for its financial support.

These mistakes were corrected by an act passed in 1905. The provisions of this instrument leave no doubt of the intention of the General Assembly to maintain a full-fledged archives department. This department was to have "the care and custody of all the offi-

cial archives of the State not . . . in current use." In order that these records might be available for research, they were to be concentrated, along with any papers that should be deposited by private owners, in "separate apartments" in the State House under the supervision of a secretary to be employed by the commission. The "diffusion of knowledge in reference to the history and resources of the State" was to be the general aim of the commission, and with this in view it was to collect data, particularly those relating to the soldiers of the Revolution and the War Between the States, to publish "official records and historical materials," to direct the marking of historic places, and to supervise the exploration of "historical remains and Indian mounds."

Originally made up of the Secretary of State, ex officio, and four other citizens of the State appointed by the Governor, the membership of the commission was changed in 1915 to consist of the heads of the history departments in four State colleges, a representative of the United Confederate Veterans, and a representative of the South Carolina Historical Society; and to these in 1930 was added a representative of the American Legion. Apart from this, there have been no important changes in the act of 1905. In most respects this law is adequate; but it may be said, without injury to the feelings of anyone, that the record of the agency that it created perfectly illustrates the well-known fact that to accomplish a purpose much more is needed than an adequate law.

A competent man was appointed secretary in 1905, and he remained in office until 1949. He was given no regular help, however, until 1924, and it was not until almost the end of his administration that he had even the approximation of an adequate staff. The first appropriation to the reorganized commission was $3,500. Twenty years later, in 1925, the amount was only $7,623, and it was 1945 before the figure reached $20,000. The original quarters provided for the archives, though grandiloquently described as "separate apartments," were actually only an office and basement storage space in the State House. In 1936 the records were transferred to the World War Memorial; but it was immediately apparent that the space provided there for the Historical Commission was entirely inadequate, and in other respects the building was not suitable as a record repository. Even in its publication program, upon which great emphasis had been placed, the commission was unable to realize its hopes.

Since the beginning of the fiscal year 1949-50 the commission has been struggling, with every means at its command, to remedy this

situation. The first step was to make a frank confession of its failures. The following quotations from the resulting reports will indicate both the extent of this confession and the nature of the problems which the commission then faced and, to a large extent, is still facing:

With respect to its function as the custodian of all the non-current records of the state it should be pointed out that, while the Commission has taken into its custody great quantities of these records, it has not been able to file and otherwise make accessible a large portion of them, with the result that thousands of documents, particularly those of the period since 1877, are still heaped in great piles on the floor of the War Memorial. Moreover, no systematic effort is being made at the present time to secure the transfer of non-current records from the various state agencies to the Commission.

The Commission feels that it has been more or less successful in performing its duty to collect "materials bearing upon the history of the state." Transcripts have been made of documents in England and in various Federal repositories, especially of those relating to Confederate soldiers found in the latter, and these are being constantly consulted. There are other records to be secured, however, before this duty can be said to have been completely fulfilled. This is particularly true of records in the various counties, notably those in Charleston County which include many state records which were not transferred to Columbia when the capital was moved in 1790.

With respect to its duty to provide for "the orderly arrangement, indexing, and preservation" of the records, the Commission feels that much has been accomplished. The greater number of the older records have been arranged and, in many cases, indexed. It must be admitted, however, that the Commission has been unable to prepare adequate calendars and inventories, thus imposing upon its staff the necessity of enumerating the records from memory for each person who desires to consult them. It is also true that little has been done in the way of restoring damaged records. Care has been exercised to prevent further damage, but, with the exception of a few documents which have been sent to a professional for restoration, virtually no repair work has been undertaken. The result is that a great number of the most valuable records are in a precarious condition, and this problem is aggravated by the fact that they are in a building in which there is no control of atmospheric conditions.

The chief means employed by the Commission in carrying out its duty to provide for the "diffusion of knowledge regarding the history of the state" and to publish "official records and historical materials" has been the publication of original documents and monographic studies. Eighty-six such publications have been issued, but a number of these are little more than slender pamphlets. It has been pointed out again and again that they contain only a small fraction of the records that should have been made available in printed form. Of all the thirteen original states, South Carolina has shown the least interest in publishing its early records.

In marking historic sites and in collecting private papers the Commission has

been less active than in the performance of other duties. It has aided in the marking of certain important places, and its facilities were made available to the Historical Markers Survey while that agency was functioning between the years 1936 and 1948. A few private papers have been committed to its custody, but the Commission has not actively sought this type of records.

In the light of this survey of its activities over a period of more than 40 years the commission has been formulating its program for the future. Naturally, this includes a request for larger appropriations. Believing that the emphasis hitherto placed on history in its title and in that of its executive officer (he has been known since 1948 as State historian as well as secretary) gives the impression that the agency is solely concerned with the promotion of historical and genealogical research, the commission has asked that the agency be named the Department of Archives and History and that its chief administrative officer be called simply the director. It has recommended that the commission be continued as at present constituted. Further in the matter of administrative reorganization, it has asked that the staff, now consisting of eight members, be increased; that the titles of chief clerk and clerks be replaced by more appropriate ones; that the staff be organized in four divisions, namely, administration, reference, preservation and duplication, and publication; that provision be made for present members to receive training for new duties and for future appointees to meet definite qualifications; and that a system of promotion be adopted.

With respect to the problem of space the commission has recommended that an additional building be erected near the World War Memorial and, if feasible, connected with it, in order that the space in the Memorial may continue to be used and that the present advantage of easy access to the State and University libraries may not be lost. To determine as far as possible what should be the size of this building, the commission has committed itself to making a survey of records in all State departments. If the construction of this building is unduly delayed, the commission is prepared to ask for a warehouse in which to store the records that should be accessioned immediately.

To facilitate the use of records already in its custody the commission has undertaken to prepare, and to publish as each part is completed, a series of preliminary inventories, to be followed, it is hoped, by a series of calendars. To make available in the State archives as many of the early local records as possible, it has outlined a plan for microfilming these records. Because private records are now being much more successfully collected than formerly by the

South Carolina Historical Society and the University South Caroliniana Library, the commission has resolved not to compete in this field. With local organizations making some provision for historical markers and the State Highway Department defraying much of the expense, the commission has decided to do nothing at present in this cause but exercise its right to review the proposed inscriptions.

Finally, the commission has resolved to resort to every means that will enable it to increase the number of its publications. Feeling that its failure to publish the early records has impeded the study of State and, in certain respects, national history, and convinced that a good record in publication is absolutely essential if support is to be gained for other features of its program, the commission has announced that it will begin to print a series of bibliographies, a roster of Confederate soldiers, a series of basic documents, a series of illustrated topics in South Carolina history, and, most important, a series to be known as "The Colonial Records of South Carolina," which it is estimated will include at least 40 stout volumes.

This program or parts of it have been in operation for a little more than two years. It is not unreasonable to ask: What has been accomplished in this time?

The annual appropriation has been increased from $22,839 to $38,127, or 67 percent. That not all of this increase is the result of the continuing inflation is indicated by marked variation among the different appropriation items. The amount provided for salaries has been increased 30 percent, that for equipment 310 percent, and that for printing 433 percent.[2]

The question of a change in the title of the department has become entangled with a proposal to unite the Historical Commission with the State Library and is still pending, but the suggested titles of members of the staff have been approved. At least one inequity in the salary schedule has been removed, certain standards have been applied in filling two vacancies, and a step has been taken in the direction of providing training for members already in service.

Better storage facilities have been provided for unarranged records. A system of arrangement by office of origin has been introduced, making more rapid handling possible. The preparation of inventories is being slowly but satisfactorily carried forward. And, thanks to the cooperation of the Genealogical Society of the Church

[2] Since this statement was made, the appropriation for the fiscal year 1952-53 has been approved. The total amount of $53,427 represents an increase of 134 percent over that of 1948-49. The amount provided for salaries shows an increase during this period of 33 percent, that for equipment 2,170 percent, and that for printing 803 percent.

of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the plan of microfilming county records has been more successful than the commission ever dared hope that it could be. At the close of the last fiscal year the films acquired through the society, plus those obtained from other sources, amounted to 85,300 feet, reproducing 1,073,400 pages of records. These include the greater number of the highly-prized Charleston County archives.

It is mainly, however, upon its work as editor and publisher that the claim of the commission to some accomplishment during the past two years must rest. With the exception of the Confederate roster, a beginning has been made in publishing each of the several promised series;[3] and, in the case of the Roster, one volume will soon be ready for the printer. The bibliographies have proved to be more useful than was expected. The first number is a syllabus for a course in State history. Having been adapted for use with the new history of South Carolina by David Duncan Wallace, it is already being used in several college courses. The second number is a classified checklist of all the printed materials relating to the State, including the printed public records. Among other uses to which it is being put is that of listing the holdings of every South Caroliniana collection in the State according to an arrangement which will eventually approximate a union checklist. These publications, however, are looked upon by the commission as something in the nature of potboilers. Its pride and joy is the colonial records series. The first volume was issued in March of 1951; another is now in page proof. When, and if, this series is completed it will probably be more extensive than that for any other State.[4] Most encouraging with regard to these publications is the fact that they have been in a measure responsible for an increase of 460 percent in the commission's revenue from sales.

The commission has not been able to secure its new building. It is making an appeal for photostatic equipment, a microfilm camera, and a laminator.[5] Whether it will be able to obtain these things and others that are essential to carrying out other features of its program remains to be seen.

[3] The commission has also issued the first number of *A Checklist of South Carolina State Publications*, which it will publish annually until arrangements can be made for its continuance by another State agency.

[4] This second volume was published in January 1952, and the third volume is now in press. Plans for future volumes having been recently approved by the Budget and Control Board, there seems to be little reason to believe that the series will not be completed. It is estimated that the cost of printing will be in excess of $200,000.

[5] The appropriation for 1952-53 provides for the purchase of laminating equipment which, it is expected, will be installed before the fall of 1952.